

THE RETURN OF GOEBBELS' FILM-MAKERS

The Dilemma Posed by Werner Krauss and Veit Harlan

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THE motion picture *Jud Süß* ("Jew Süß") was first shown in German and foreign theaters in 1940, shortly after Hitler began his war and took the first large steps to his "solution of the Jewish problem." The connection between the movie and these events was not fortuitous; as a matter of fact, the movie celebrated them. In 1945, with the end of the Hitler regime, *Jud Süß* was banned by decree of the Allied Military Occupation Governments, and the ban has remained in force ever since. But the picture is still well remembered by many Germans, and only recently it has become the occasion of two *causes célèbres*, the case of Veit Harlan, its co-author and director, and that of Werner Krauss, one of the actors. As a result, Germany has witnessed court trials, furious controversies in the press, political intrigues, and rather serious street riots.

What led to all this was the question whether those closely connected with the making of the picture could, ten years later,

THE German film *Jud Süß* ("Jew Süß") is known throughout the world as one of the most vicious products of Nazi propaganda against the Jews. The recent release of a new film by Veit Harlan, the director of *Jud Süß*, who in three successive trials has been cleared of all charges of collaboration with the Nazis, and the appearance on the Berlin stage of Werner Krauss, one of the featured actors in the picture, have aroused passions to fever pitch in Germany and evoked once more, in one of its innumerable guises, the whole problem of the guilt of the collaborator. NORBERT MUHLEN here reports the details of the controversy which has raged in Germany, and analyzes what it has to reveal of the state of the German mind today and the complexity of the question of German guilt. Mr. Muhlen is a close student of German politics; his most recent contribution to COMMENTARY was "The New Nazis of Germany," a report on life in the Soviet Zone, published in our January issue.

again participate in the public artistic life of their country. Have they, by their past actions, lost their right ever to be able to show themselves again on the German scene, as many anti-Nazi Germans claim? Or has the time come when by-gones (rather, *some* by-gones) should be by-gones, as other Germans, also including many old foes and victims of the Nazis, argue? This question seems, with the possible exception of rearmament, the one most likely to stir up popular passion in Western Germany today, and much of the excitement it brews is bound to flow over into other lands too.

THE *Jew Süß* picture, the *corpus delicti* in both cases, is generally acknowledged to have been a pure piece of propaganda, whose purpose was to make its audiences hate Jews, to justify their extermination by the government, and to popularize the pogromistic *Weltanschauung* which, according to Goebbels, the German people did not yet sufficiently understand and accept. For this "message," the 18th-century history of the *Jew Süß* was well suited. He had been the ruthless financial director and sole minister of the despotic ruler of the Duchy of Württemberg, and he had ended his life upon the gallows after his master died. Most Germans were already familiar with the figure and the fate of this Jew through the classical short story by Wilhelm Hauff, written in the early 19th century with all the disgust felt by a man of the Enlightenment for tyrannical government, though also with pity for the "unfortunate children of Abraham." Hauff's story was prescribed reading for literate Germans for more than a century. The novelist Lion Feuchtwanger, in the 1920's, had to twist this story only slightly to have his slick, streamlined best-seller present *Jew Süß* as a victim of anti-Semitism, capitalism, and reaction. Dr.

Joseph Goebbels had to twist the same story only a little in the opposite direction to present him on the screen as a bloodthirsty exploiter, the personification of "*Die Juden sind unser Unglück*" ("The Jews are our misfortune").

Goebbels commissioned Veit Harlan to write the script and direct the picture. Harlan, who had been an outstanding actor in the Weimar Republic, was by now one of the leading movie-makers of a Germany whose cinematic leaders had emigrated for racial, political, or artistic reasons. Harlan's original script was edited by Goebbels, who considered it not sufficiently anti-Semitic. In Harlan's version, for instance, Süß's last words were a horrible malediction cursing his executioners and their people. Goebbels flew into a rage over this scene—he wished the Jew to die less heroically and he made him whimper despicably for mercy. The Propaganda Minister also laid his hand on other scenes, and Harlan could later prove that in directing the film he himself had eliminated a few of the most poisonous of Goebbels' touches—whether for artistic or other reasons, we do not know. Nevertheless, the finished picture was a merciless divertissement on the theme of Jewish extermination; it did not, one is happy to say, fare too well at the box offices.

After the Nazi defeat, Harlan had to defend himself three times in German courts against the charge of being a major Nazi; had he been convicted he would have been barred from all stage and screen work. First he stood trial in the Hamburg Denazification Chamber (Central Committee for the Elimination of Nazis), where an anti-Nazi jury had to acquit him in accordance with the denazification law drawn up and decreed by Occupation authorities that made formal membership in Nazi organizations the legal test for individual guilt; the court found no evidence of Harlan's membership in any one of the organizations classified as criminal. He stood a second trial before a regular Hamburg jury for his individual "crime against humanity" in participating in the making of the Jew Süß picture, and he was again ac-

quitted for lack of evidence proving criminal intent. After the British Occupation Zone Supreme Court in Cologne declared this acquittal null and void, the case went back for retrial to the Hamburg court, which took testimony for a month and arrived at a second acquittal in April 1950. Three months later the office of the attorney general declared that it would not appeal the judgment, although it considered it a miscarriage of justice; evidence could not be produced to refute Harlan's claim that he would have been in danger of his life had he not followed Goebbels' orders to make the picture; moreover, there would be even less evidence at a new trial because, as the prosecuting authority put it, "experience shows that the prosecution witnesses tend to become more and more tolerant as time goes on."

WHETHER Harlan was a "real" Nazi, or a hapless non-Nazi, or—as he himself alleged with witnesses and evidence—an anti-Nazi in protective brown coloring, is a question hard to answer in purely legalistic terms. From what was learned at the trials, and from the testimony of people who know Harlan well, it seems that he was a rather representative member of that largest class of Germans which cannot be fitted snugly into the customary triptych of "real" Nazis, non-Nazis, and anti-Nazis. In Harlan's case, as in so many others, a mixture of various motives, none of them being a fanatical enthusiasm for the totalitarian system, produced that irresponsible submission to and support of the Nazi dictatorship which was its real source of popular strength.

Harlan "only followed orders." Had he refused to follow orders, he pleaded, his life would have been in danger—or if not his life, at least the style of living to which a successful movie-maker is accustomed. "I did not want to have to ride again on street cars," he admitted with the vanity of a man convinced that the world owed him a Rolls Royce. Easily tempted and easily scared, Harlan acceded to a *Gleichschaltung* that cleared the way for his many professional triumphs and Nazi honors—in 1943 Goebbels even con-

ferred upon the actor the title of "professor." (It made Harlan "very happy," Goebbels noted in his diaries.) In his own justification, he has asserted that he intervened on behalf of a political prisoner (true), he remained on friendly terms with a number of Jews (also true), he had many controversies with Goebbels (again true), and—that eternal half-truth in the fellow-traveler's self-defense—he "kept things from getting worse."

Now that Harlan had collected what the Germans called "Persil" certificates (Persil being the name of a popular powder soap for dirty linen), he could return to his old vocation of making movies. Since he is one of the very few available craftsmen left in the German field, he quickly found a producer as well as a distributor to finance his new venture. Six months after his final acquittal he offered a new film to German exhibitors, a melancholy love picture titled *Unsterbliche Geliebte* ("Immortal Beloved"), based on Theodor Storm's 19th-century novella, *Aquis Submersus*.

A NUMBER of theaters booked the new picture immediately, even before it was finished, but a voice was heard in protest. Erich Lueth had been movie critic for a Hamburg daily paper before Hitler, had been fired by the Nazis, and spent the years of the Third Reich as advertising manager of a sewing machine concern, then as a soldier drafted into the German army, and finally as prisoner of war; after the debacle he was appointed press chief and *Senatsdirektor* by the Social Democratic Hamburg city government.

Representing Hamburg officially at the opening of German Motion Picture Week in that city, Lueth declared: "His [Harlan's] acquittal in Hamburg was only formal, the judgment convicted him morally. We request that German motion picture distributors and theater owners show an attitude that will not be inexpensive for them but which we all ought to pay a price for—moral stamina. . . ."

What he meant by this Lueth soon made clear in an open letter to Harlan written on

his personal responsibility: "Anyone who has been as outstanding a director of Nazi movies as the co-creator of *Jud Süß*, Herr Harlan, should be blackballed in disgust by all decent Germans mindful of the tears that still flow at millions of Jewish graves. . . . Harlan's re-emergence will open wounds which have hardly closed. . . . It is the duty even more than the right of all decent Germans to be ready, not only to protest against, but to boycott Veit Harlan."

Harlan promptly sued Lueth before the Hamburg regional court. That body, in a decision without much relation to, or understanding of, political realities, decided that Herr Lueth's constitutional right of free speech collided with Herr Harlan's equally constitutional rights of free expression and free trade. Since Harlan was lawfully acquitted, the court continued, he had the right to resume his old trade as screen director, even if it was "politically unwise and perhaps tactless." And although "there was no evidence that Herr Lueth acted from selfish or immoral motives" (which alone would make a call for a boycott criminal under German law), he certainly aimed to prevent Harlan from working at his chosen profession; the court therefore ruled that Herr Lueth would have to abstain from calling for a boycott on the pain of fines and jail sentence.

Lueth appealed this decision immediately, and a great number of Germans, as individuals and as members of various organizations, publicly declared their solidarity with Lueth and his call for a boycott. "That's the trouble with us Germans," Lueth had sighed once in a talk with this writer. "We don't expose ourselves personally in matters of public concern." But the reaction to his boycott appeal showed that there were quite a few Germans who, when confronted with a case like Veit Harlan's, were willing to expose themselves in order to fight the memory of that past with which his name is associated.

WHILE the Harlan "affair" was unfolding, the famous Vienna Burgtheater company, then on its first—and successful—post-war visit to Western Germany, scheduled a

visit to the city of West Berlin as part of the last leg of its trip. Its leading female player was Frau Helene Thimig, a great actress, the widow of Max Reinhardt, and definitely a "real" Nazi victim. The troupe's director was Walter Felsenstein, a Communist of Austrian Jewish descent who, as a stage director in East Berlin, had been awarded the "National Prize" by the East German Communist government; he was now working in Vienna, which is less firm against Communists in public life than West Berlin, and thus he was able, by virtue of an "Austrian-German cultural exchange"—under which slogan the Vienna troupe toured Germany—to gain an entry into West Berlin that he could not have had coming directly from East Berlin. The leading male star of the company was Werner Krauss, a famous and very popular old actor who ten years before had played (at Goebbels' "request") the role of a rabbi and a few minor Jewish parts in *Jud Süß*, injecting into all of them a highly repulsive note.

In the first postwar years Krauss had not been permitted to appear on the stage until after having been cleared in three separate denazification trials; after his acquittal a number of returned Jewish and political refugees, some of them active in the office of Military Government, joined forces to get a contract for Krauss at the Burgtheater.

When Krauss's visit to Berlin was announced, a few carefully worded objections were put into print by Berlin's leading drama critic, while three leaders of the West Berlin Jewish community paid a protest visit to West Berlin's Lord Mayor Ernst Reuter—himself a one-time inhabitant of the Nazi concentration camps, an exile in Turkey during most of Hitler's reign, and a bitter foe of anti-Semitism. Reuter declared to the Jewish delegation that he was unwilling to tolerate anything that would hurt their feelings, but he also explained to them that the appearance of the Vienna troupe was in the interests of the city, and that he did not see how "inviting Krauss out" would be of benefit to the Jewish community or to the fight against anti-Semitism. How this meeting ended we

can only guess, since it was not recorded, and the participants gave two substantially different versions of it. According to Reuter, the Jewish delegation was convinced and promised that it would not publish a protest or do anything at all to hinder the appearance of Krauss. According to Heinz Galinski, one of the three Jewish delegates, this was not true (his two fellow delegates did not reveal their recollections of the meeting).

BEFORE the Vienna troupe formally opened its West Berlin stay with Ibsen's play, *John Gabriel Borkman*, the Berlin Jewish community, through its spokesman Galinski, published a sharp protest against Krauss's appearance. Responding to it, a large group of students at West Berlin's two main universities—the Free University and the Technical University—announced that on the play's first night they would march to the theater on nearby Kurfuerstendamm from their *Studentenhaus* to demonstrate their solidarity with their Jewish fellow citizens. "We refuse to see once more in Berlin the man who, by his work in the *Jew Süß* picture, directly incited the youth to race hatred," the president of the student council of the Technical University, Günther Zwingmann, proclaimed. The pro-rector of the Free University and leaders of its student body joined him; and the students painted signs with yellow stars and the words, "Don't forget that!" to be paraded outside the theater. The West Berlin police at first permitted but at the last minute forbade the demonstration. Reuter, remonstrating with the demonstrators, told them over the radio: "After all there must be a time for forgiveness. . . . Berlin will show that it is a city that can forgive."

Despite the police ban and Reuter's appeal, numbers of students, joined by some members of Berlin's Jewish community, members of the Society for Christian-Jewish Cooperation, Jewish DP's, and by individual anti-Nazis, marched on the opening night toward the theater, shouting slogans such as "*Nazi-Krauss, geh nach Haus!*" ("Nazi Krauss, go home") and "*Felsenstein, geh heim!*" (Felsenstein, go home"). They were

met near the theater by a strong force of West Berlin police. There were some ugly scuffles between the police and the demonstrators, and some of the latter were knocked to the ground and beaten. The excitement flowed over into the theater, where one of the audience stepped on the stage and told of what was going on outside, urging that the performance be discontinued. He was bodily thrown out of the theater by stagehands, and so were others who loudly protested against Krauss; still others shouted in opposition: "We want Krauss!"

Similar incidents occurred the next evening, although the authorities threw a police cordon equipped with "water guns" around the theater. But the Kurfuerstendamm, which is Berlin's equivalent of Broadway and Fifth Avenue combined, saw brawls continue, with even a few "real" Nazis turning up with anti-Semitic slogans, and some playgoers were heard making anti-Semitic remarks against the demonstrators. RIAS, the American-sponsored radio station with a large audience behind the Iron Curtain, broadcast eyewitness reports from the battle scene; and the Communists of East Berlin and East Germany greatly enjoyed "the revolt," as they called it, "of the free Berliners against their neo-fascist city government, their Nazi guests, and their American overlords." What the Communists did not mention was that the anti-Nazi demonstrators were also anti-Communists who for four years had consistently demonstrated against the totalitarians from the East too.

It was perhaps only to be expected that, with Mayor Reuter taking a stand which was not very popular even among his own close political friends, his political rivals and enemies should have tried to make capital of the situation. Kurt Schumacher, the leader of the German Social Democratic party, and Franz Neumann, his Berlin representative, now attacked Reuter (himself a Social Democrat) and demanded that he cancel the Krauss performances—though they themselves had found no cause for concern during Krauss's tour of Western Germany.

When, after the third performance, the

tumult still did not die down and the anti-Krauss forces threatened new and more vigorous demonstrations, Krauss himself and his Vienna troupe decided to break off their Berlin visit. Mayor Reuter spoke to his city by radio, explaining that he had not foreseen these incidents, since Krauss had played undisturbedly for several years past in Austria and Western Germany, and in view moreover of his (Reuter's) own supposedly conciliatory agreement with the representatives of the Jewish community. He also expressed his deep regret that people had been hurt in the melees, but, he continued, he himself could not give way to the protesters, for "God has not made me a judge over other men. I believe that there must be a time when people forgive. No force in the world shall keep me from this belief, not even the risk of a break with my best friends. From perennial continuation of hatred nothing good can ever arise." To this Herr Galinski publicly retorted that "neither Herr Reuter nor the city of Berlin have been asked whether they forgive or not—for they have nothing to forgive. The dead of Auschwitz and Maidanek do not forgive, and we, their survivors, are therefore not permitted nor are we able to forgive."

Afterward Mayor Reuter reasserted his intention of fighting anti-Semitism if and when "instincts believed to be dead for years should revive"; and the students' parliament of the Technical University published an open letter to the Jewish community of Berlin, affirming that "we would oppose with all the means at our command any attempt to create anew a racial problem in Germany. . . . We definitely oppose anything that might hurt our Jewish fellow citizens." That the people of Berlin had not as a whole shown any signs of anti-Semitic feeling during or after the riots is attested to by all competent observers, from Herr Galinski to Mr. Raymond Page, the director of the Berlin Office of the United States High Commissioner for Germany.

THE Werner Krauss "incident" is closed, with Krauss safely back in Vienna, far from Berlin's angry crowds. The case of

Veit Harlan may yet, when his new picture is widely shown, be an occasion for controversy and even demonstration—though outside Berlin there will probably be little of the spectacular. But what do these two events tell us about the political and spiritual climate of West Germany today?

Firstly, it is clear that anti-Semitism is still on the defensive in post-Hitler Germany. The Harlan and the Krauss protests were begun by people ashamed of the memories of Nazi pogroms, and even Veit Harlan found it necessary to stress as vigorously as he could that he was really a philo-Semite, while Krauss in Berlin paid public homage to the memory of the Jewish Austrian, Max Reinhardt ("to whom I owe everything in my life"). Those who opposed the call for a boycott were not only the people who had been themselves tainted with guilt in the Nazi era—though there were undoubtedly many such voices in the pro-Harlan and pro-Krauss chorus. There were also, first of all, people who did not want politics to interfere with their enjoyment of an artist; secondly, those to whom it seemed ironical and unjust that the return of ex-Nazi actors or movie directors should be more bitterly opposed than that of far guiltier politicians, administrators, businessmen, or writers, simply because entertainers figured more prominently in the public view; thirdly, there were those who felt as did the staunch Austrian anti-Nazi Hans Weigel, when he said that "the time has come to forget human weaknesses, omissions, and concessions to the terror state if they were humanly understandable and not criminal."

THIS last point of view is probably the most widespread one, but it does not supply a principle easy of application. The anti-Semitic policy, and its consequences, was the most monstrous feature of the Nazi regime, and its crimes against the Jews cannot be glossed over with considerations of political expediency—considerations aiming to heal old divisions and to satisfy the desire of the majority of the Germans to "forgive and forget." Harlan and Krauss may have let them-

selves be used as instruments of anti-Semitic propaganda only unwillingly, but their submission is nevertheless something for which they have now, in some measure, to bear the consequences. Any possible injustice that might be done them as individuals by their exclusion from the German stage and screen is counterbalanced by the injustice done to the feelings of Jewish mourners, by the anguished memories stirred up by the names and faces of these two men. Erich Lueth, in protesting against Harlan's comeback, and the Berliners, in demonstrating against Krauss, acted out of a right moral instinct.

Yet when Mayor Reuter fought for the right of Werner Krauss to appear on the Berlin stage—it should be noted that Reuter has expressed sympathy with the boycott of Harlan's films—it was for reasons of political morality, too, rather than mere expediency. For totalitarianism always involves, and corrupts, a majority of the people. That an advocate of mass murder like Streicher was to be silenced forever, every decent German agreed; Ilse Koch was convicted by a German court, and no German voice was raised in her defense; but opinion is split with regard to the tens of thousands of Krausses, exactly because people who have themselves lived under Nazism—including many who fought against it—recognize how difficult it was for the individual not to be corrupted to some degree. To turn all these people into perennial outcasts, to exclude from the new society even those who may be willing honestly to mend their ways and break with their past, would be to encourage hostility against the young German republic and limit significant possibilities for the regeneration of individual Germans and German society. Totalitarianism brands whole groups of people as eternal enemies. Can democracy, which believes in—and is based on—the improbability and potential decency of the individual and society, rightfully insist that all sinners against civilized morality, even if they have committed no legally punishable acts of criminality, be condemned to lifelong punishment, denied a second chance? This is the dilemma posed by the cases of Harlan and Krauss.